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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student Teachers' Perceptions of Feedback as an aid to Reflection for developing effective Practice in the Classroom.

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### Abstract

Since Schön's influential work on reflective practice reflection has been prioritised in teacher education programmes internationally. The research described in this paper examined the development of postgraduate student teachers' reflective processes in their first school placement. 25 students were asked to write an account of their evolution in an area of their teaching, and how they were supported to evaluate lessons and reflect on their practice. Subsequently, a sample was interviewed to explore themes arising from the essays. In describing their development of a reflective perspective, the students identified useful feedback from three main sources: mentors, peers and pupils. Although the research took place within a Scottish context, the different roles that feedback played in the development of reflection should be of interest to teacher educators and student teachers internationally, as it could be argued that beginning teachers in every country face similar issues relating to reflection.

**Keywords:** reflection; initial teacher education; peer feedback; pupil feedback; mentor feedback.

## Introduction:

Critical reflection is seen as fundamental for effectiveness in teaching (Brookfield, 1995, Danielson 2009). In Scotland, where the research described in this paper took place, the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS), which regulates the teaching profession, incorporates a number of benchmarks relating to reflective practice in its Standard for full registration as a teacher. Other parts of the UK also demand that teachers reflect on their practice (Department of Education 2012, GTCNI online). The issue of reflection in teaching is of international importance, with research studies throughout Europe underlining its crucial nature in forming effective teachers (Danielson 2002, Newby et al. 2007, European Commission 2013). *'To be fully effective in teaching, ... teachers themselves need to reflect ... in the context of their particular school environment...'* (European Union, 2009: 9).

Reflective thinking implies 'judgement suspended during further enquiry' (Dewey, 1910: 13), as teachers analyse and assign meaning to their experiences in the classroom, in order to increase their efficacy. Teacher reflection is considered important if it leads to changes in practice, which improve the learners' knowledge and understanding. It may be considered as a way of learning from experience (Jasper and Rolfe, 2011). Through constant analysis of their classroom practice, teachers become 'transformative intellectuals' (Nieto et al, 2002: 345), taking a pro-active stance in the consistent improvement of their teaching.

Schön (1991) differentiates between 'Reflection in action', the decisions that a practitioner makes during the course of a lesson, for example, and 'Reflection on action', the thoughtful contemplation of events which takes place after the lesson has ended. An additional stage of reflection has been added by Killion and Todnem (1991): 'Reflection for action', when what occurred during the lesson is critically evaluated and points for improvement are determined; the 'What?' followed by the 'So What?' followed by the 'Now What?' (Rolfe et al. 2001, Abrami 2008).

Student teachers, coming from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, may find the concept of reflection difficult (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Hobbs (2007), for example, suggests that student practitioners may not be developmentally ready to analyse the complex decisions and actions taken during teaching situations. Jarvis (2005) considers that the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' may have become devalued, as a result of inconsistent use or over-theorisation (Rushton & Suter, 2012). It has been suggested that reflection may become ritualistic, a tick-box activity which does not entail critical exploration of practice (Boud and Walker, 1998), but, rather, rationalises existing practice (Loughran, 2002),

justifying actions and decisions taken (Finlay, 2008). There is therefore some confusion, on the part of teachers and students, about what reflection actually entails (Finlay, 2008). The 'messiness' of the classroom situation, compared to the theoretical 'high ground' means that formulaic approaches to reflection cannot be considered effective; 'in the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution' (Schön, 1987:3). While some may consider it fairly straightforward to identify if a lesson was successful or not, the recognition of causes and consequences for next steps may demand a more focused approach (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005).

There have been a number of suggested models for supporting the development of reflection (Kolb 1984, Roth 1989, Peters 1991, Rolfe et al. 2001). These all emphasise the practitioner's need to move from merely describing the situation to analysis, and finally to seeking solutions with a view to improvement, with or without reference to theory. Smyth (1989: 5), drawing on Dewey's and Schön's work, describes a framework model of four stages of reflection which are sequential, and can be considered fairly typical of the process student teachers go through when learning to reflect:

- describing: what do I do?
- informing: what does this mean?
- confronting: how did I come to be like this?
- reconstructing: how might I do things differently?

Student teachers' evaluations of their lessons could be characterised as broadly aiming to answer the questions above, however, what is not always clear is how students, beginning their career as teachers, are helped to understand what they are actually 'describing'; what 'information' this gives them; the reasons for their actions; and how, once issues have been identified, they might improve by adapting or changing their practice.

It may therefore be helpful to draw on Brookfield's work in conceptualising the way that students might approach reflection (1995). Brookfield suggests four lenses through which to conduct reflection:

- the autobiographical, which explores the practitioner's own beliefs and experiences;
- our students' eyes, where learner feedback is used to inform evaluation of teaching and learning;
- colleagues' experiences, where peers exchange insights into practice;
- theoretical literature, the link between teachers' 'private troubles and broader political processes' (p. 37-8).

Bearing in mind Smyth's stages of reflection and Brookfield's four lenses, the study described in this paper aimed to explore students' perceptions of the way they had developed a reflective perspective on their classroom practice through evaluation of their lessons, aided by feedback and the research literature, to increase their competence in areas they had identified as important to their progress. It also aimed to establish what challenges, if any,

they had had in developing a critically reflective approach. The research questions were as follows:

What do students find helpful in developing a reflective approach to their classroom practice in their first teaching placement?

What are the challenges to developing a reflective approach to teaching and learning?

As student teachers in a secondary school subject department, all the students in the study had been allocated mentors in their placement. Much has been written about the importance of mentoring by a more experienced teacher, with relation to the development of reflection (Danielson 2002, Harrison et al. 2005). Within a social-constructivist approach, students are helped to operate in their 'zone of proximal development', identifying and deconstructing apparent successes and areas requiring improvement in lessons, through discussion with the more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978). However, it is acknowledged that mentoring can bring some issues of inconsistency (Hudson, 2014) and we were keen to discover if students had developed additional strategies to enable them to analyse their lessons in order to improve their practice.

As noted above, an important factor in evaluating the effectiveness of practice is feedback, either explicit, from a mentor, the pupils or peers, or implicit, that is, the student teacher's 'feel' for the effectiveness of a lesson, often based on perceptions of pupil engagement, pupils' active participation, or fulfilment of the success criteria (Hiebert et al., 2007). The study aimed to investigate how student teachers developed their awareness of different kinds of feedback, and how they interpreted them, enabling them to develop a 'feel' for the success or otherwise of the lesson, permitting them to use Brookfield's lenses to answer Smyth's questions more confidently and competently than when they had started. Of further interest was whether particular lenses were seen as helpful and if students used all of the lenses, including referencing their analysis of lessons to theory.

Praxis, the union between practice and theory, 'a dynamic interplay of theoretical concepts and professional work within a critically reflective mindset' (Macpherson, 1996, n.d.), implies implementation of actions in the classroom from a theoretically informed stance related to pedagogical approaches. The importance of linking what happens in lessons to theoretical questions is seen as crucial in the development of understanding the praxis-theory interaction (Stenhouse, 1983). Theory may inform student teachers' planning, but it is also important that sensitivity towards the learners allows them to use theoretical considerations to adapt their teaching during a lesson and to evaluate their practice afterwards, so that the cycle of planning and reflection continues better informed (Kolb 1984, Gibbs 1988). The students who took part in the study had all demonstrated good understanding of theories of learning and subject specific pedagogy. We were therefore keen to discover whether they used them when reflecting on their actions and their consequences in the classroom.

## The Study

In the university where the research took place, students are required to submit a 4000 word essay after their first school placement, describing how they used theory and reflection to improve their understanding of an area of their practice and enhance their performance in the classroom. This essay forms part of the summative assessment of their programme. Since this reflective piece of work appeared potentially to be a rich source of data, in that it was a record of perceptions of their development as reflective practitioners to date, we requested permission from a cohort of students to examine these essays to see if there were any common themes arising in their perceptions of their development.

25 postgraduate secondary modern languages students agreed to close analysis of their essays. This group could be described as a 'convenience sample' as both researchers worked with these students in the university. While it is acknowledged that convenience samples cannot be truly representative and may be less rigorous (Marshall, 1996), our common subject discipline meant that we understood clearly the issues that the students described in their evaluations of their lessons. In addition, their languages backgrounds were considered an advantage, as they had a high level of communication skills, which were seen as particularly advantageous during the interviews. However, although they were able to articulate their thinking, this did not necessarily imply clarity of thought, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of the findings. Those students could also be considered in some way representative of the wider student teacher cohort, as all were novices regarding the interrogation of their practice in the classroom environment, and although the students in the study were all learning to teach one subject area, modern languages, they were by no means a homogenous group. The students came from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities with an age range of between 23 and 42.

The students' first placement lasted six weeks. The schools in which the students were placed reflected a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and attitudes towards modern languages learning. The essays were in two parts: the first part comprised a literature review of an area of subject specific pedagogy which the student wished to develop; the second part described their evolving process of reflection, demonstrating how they had used evaluations of lessons and feedback to improve their teaching skills throughout the placement.

The students' essays were essentially an autobiographical account of their perceptions of their development as novice teachers over a six week period within the social conditions of a secondary school classroom. The accounts of how they went about deconstructing and making sense of their classroom experiences meant that taking a narrative enquiry stance seemed an appropriate analysis tool. 'To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study' (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006: 375). Narrative enquiry throws up a number of issues, of which it is important to be aware. Firstly, autobiographical accounts, such as the ones in the study, can be considered to be tied up with notions of identity (Tsui, 2007), thus, are potentially highly subjective. The autobiographical nature of the data meant that we had to be sensitive to the way they had been constructed: 'the plotlines people choose to tell and the audiences to whom they tell, all influence autobiographical narrative inquiry.' (Clandinin & Huber, 2010: 442). Narrative

enquiry is associated with temporality, that is, the investigation of experiences over time and the social conditions within which they take place, related to a particular locus (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: 20). Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that with the passage of time, understanding of events is more clearly conceptualised and may often be aligned to present constructions of reality (Boardman, 1991). However, reflection on past 'reality' may be moderated, as it is filtered through the medium of the narrative (Brown & Roberts, 2000). In addition, there may be further filtering, due to the researcher's interpretation of the narrative (Bell, 2002). The rigour of narrative enquiry may therefore be considered 'slippery' to determine. While acknowledging that some may consider narrative enquiry unreliable, it could be argued that any qualitative study involves the interpretation of narrative (Denzin, 2000). Hendry (2010) contends that narrative is the foundation of all enquiry. The complexity of the students' experience, and their interpretations of these experiences and their development, required an analytical approach that could accommodate the twists and turns of their narratives. At the same time, we resolved to remain alert to tensions and inconsistencies which might render the findings less 'trustworthy' during the careful interrogation of the data in the analysis process, with the aim that a clear picture of the students' perceptions of their progress would emerge.

We were keen to see if students had undergone similar processes in becoming more skilled in answering Smyth's questions (1989), and also the ways in which they thought that reflection had informed their progress. Approximately a third of the cohort, eight students, were chosen from those who subsequently volunteered to be interviewed, so that we could further explore their perceptions of the supports they had used to develop a reflective persona in order to improve their practice. It was intended that the interviews would provide triangulation as we probed more deeply into what the students thought had assisted their reflections. The interviews took place some weeks after they had submitted the essay, which may have allowed them further time to consider their development as reflective practitioners. This may have also have meant that they had longer to re-evaluate their perceptions of their progress and/or re-construct the narrative that they wished to present. The analysis of the interview data, therefore, had to take into account the importance of being aware of possible reframing of individual experiences.

Both researchers analysed the students' essays and subsequent interviews individually, grouping similar themes and ideas into categories, before coming together to discuss and agree the classifications and the relationships between them. The interview data illustrated a more complex development process than was presented in the essays. This, in part, could be due to the students' lack of recognition in the essays of the way some of the feedback contributed to the improvement of their reflective practice. The findings will be discussed below.

## Findings

The way the students assigned meaning to their experiences, as they moved towards understanding the role of reflection in their daily lives, could be seen to echo Polkinghorne's description of their stories as 'human attempts to progress to a solution, clarification, or unravelling of an incomplete situation' (1995). Using the data from the student essays as a starting point, the interviews explored the students' perceptions of their progress in the classroom. As students described their development as beginning teachers, they identified three main sources of feedback, which they considered helpful when evaluating the successes and shortcomings in their lessons. These sources, which enabled them to reflect on causes and effects and consider 'next steps' to take in order to improve their practice, are listed below:

- mentors
- peers
- learners

The sources of helpful feedback identified by the students relate to Brookfield's first three lenses for reflection. Surprisingly, they did not identify the fourth lens, theory and research, as being helpful in developing reflective practices, although, as we will see later in this paper, during the interviews, a number of students stated that they had had concerns which had prompted them to return to theory in order to further their reflection. Each of the sources of feedback will be discussed below.

### Mentor Feedback

In the essays, the students all mentioned the role that mentors had played in helping them to develop a more reflective stance when evaluating their lessons. It was clear that feedback and discussion with the mentor helped the students to progress through the sequence of Smyth's questions and to come up with strategies for improvement. The mentors used a variety of feedback mechanisms. Some used a diagnostic checklist, provided by the university to assist the identification of key areas within the lesson. Others used notes or departmental pro-forma, which performed a similar function. The written evidence was considered useful by the students, as it provided a clear indication of areas of strength and those areas needing attention. It also provided a basis for discussion and identification of possible improvement strategies

However, in the interviews, the majority of the students said that, while the mentors' advice was very helpful for developing certain skills within the classroom and providing alternative strategies for managing specific events, their guidance was often considered directive and did not appear designed to lead to reflection. The students contrasted the advice they received from the mentors to the discussion that took place with the university tutor after an observed lesson, where they were supported to reflect on their performance, deconstructing the lesson with the tutor's help, before identifying areas and strategies for improvement. Rather than *inviting* them to think about why events occurred, confronting their actions, and encouraging the students themselves to consider how they might 'reconstruct'



their teaching approaches (Smyth, 1989), school-based mentors tended to *tell* students what their areas of weakness were, how to handle a particular situation and which teaching strategies to use. The practical nature of mentors' guidance has been noted in other research studies (Ashby et al. 2008, Hobson 2002, Evans & Abbott, 1997) and may be as a result of lack of training or simply pressure of time.

Another issue which arose in the interviews concerned the quality of advice the students received from the mentors. It appeared that students were often being given advice which ran counter to what theory, the research literature and policy identified as good practice. *'She told me: I know that's supposed to be best practice, but it takes too long and it's quicker to do it this way'*. This was potentially a matter of some concern. Paradoxically, an unintentionally positive consequence was that the students said they had returned to the literature in order to reflect and discuss among their peers what constituted good practice, using their reading to determine a research informed approach to their teaching, which they said they intended to apply in their future career.

### Peer Feedback

Only two students mentioned peers' feedback in the essays, however, all the students who were interviewed mentioned the mutual support that took place throughout the placement. Peers' feedback was identified as a valuable aid to reflection, although most students did not articulate it as such. Peer feedback usually occurred during informal occasions, usually in social gatherings in bars or cafes at the weekends, where the main topic of conversation appeared to be their placement experiences. The students also communicated on social media, typically regarding appropriate materials or activities for particular classes or groups of learners. As students discussed lessons or activities which they thought had gone particularly well or badly, their peers helped them to make sense of what had happened, identifying possible reasons for pupils' reactions, or recognising similarities to their own experience. The students talked about peer support and the value of discussing issues with others experiencing similar challenges *'letting off steam'* with *'...the only people who understand what you're going through ... the ones on the course'*. They did not appear to make the connection that through their discussions, they were actually seeking answers to Smyth's questions by problematising their experiences, evaluating them, and reviewing options for improvement. The informal nature of the surroundings appeared to be conducive to honest and open discussion. Studies investigating peer support in developing reflection tend to operate within a fairly structured framework (Harford & MacRuairc 2008, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Orsmond 2005) and the informal discussions mentioned by the students in this study perhaps merit further investigation.

### Learner Feedback

Learner feedback is seen as an important part of the teaching and learning process in higher education (Brennan & Williams 2003, Keane & MacLabhrainn 2005) and there is a variety of formal mechanisms in place to obtain feedback, through the use of questionnaires,

or on-line surveys. However, pupil feedback to schoolteachers about their learning appears to be under-researched. In the USA, there have been studies recommending the obtainment of feedback from school pupils in order to increase effective teaching and learning (Kantrell & Kane 2012, Marzano 2013). Although there have been research studies which investigate learner perceptions of a particular subject area (for example, Clarke et al. 2006, Campbell et al. 2000, Williams et al. 2002), learning styles (Kinchin, 2004) or corrective feedback (Mackey et al., 2007), there appears to be little empirical research into the role that pupil feedback plays in developing teacher efficacy in the day to day life in the classroom, despite the importance of the learner's perspective as identified by Brookfield (1995). The students' identification of learner feedback as a support for reflection was therefore of great interest.

Only three of the students mentioned obtaining feedback from pupils in the essays. However, all the students who were interviewed talked about different methods they had used to obtain feedback from the pupils, demonstrating that they were using pupils' responses as a means of identifying issues and informing their subsequent planning (Smyth 1989). The feedback could be classified in two ways: explicit feedback, where the student asked the pupils to respond non-verbally, verbally or in writing, and implicit feedback, where the student used observation to assess pupils' learning. Each type of feedback will now be discussed.

#### Explicit feedback

In the interviews the students stated that they had used a variety of techniques to gain explicit feedback as to whether their teaching had been successful or not. They asked pupils in class to signal whether they had understood, for example, by showing 'thumbs up'/'thumbs down' or displaying green, amber or red pages from their homework diaries to demonstrate their level of understanding. However, the students realised in the lessons which followed, that the pupils had not always been entirely truthful regarding their understanding, possibly because they did not want to lose face before their peers or through a desire to please the teacher. This prompted them to try other methods to gain information from the pupils about their teaching.

Four of the students said that at the end of every lesson they had asked pupils to write in their exercise books what they had learned during the lesson, and what they thought they needed to work on to improve their understanding. The student teachers could then plan for the follow-up lesson. The students who adopted this strategy stated that, although they had a clearer idea of pupils' understanding, there still remained some disjuncture between what the learners were telling them they had understood and what was observed in subsequent lessons.

A third method of collecting explicit pupil feedback had been implemented by six of the students interviewed. They asked the pupils at the end of each lesson to write on a 'post it' or 'sticky' note an example of their learning and also what might have improved the lesson. Pupils then stuck the note to the door or the whiteboard as they exited the classroom. This had the advantage of being anonymous and the students claimed that this technique

provided a more honest form of feedback. There seems to be little research into 'sticky notes'' usefulness in pupils' provision of feedback to teachers on the effectiveness or otherwise of lessons, although McGrane and Lofthouse (2010) make some interesting observations about their use in providing teacher and pupil feedback on progress. The students who used this strategy also commented on positive relationships within the classroom. They reported that learners liked the fact that they could comment formatively on the student teacher's performance through demonstrating their learning and suggesting improvements. By involving learners in assessing their learning, these students reported fewer issues relating to discipline compared to their peers. However, there appeared to be little in the way of evidence to support this notion.

### Implicit feedback

All the student teachers interviewed said that, as the placement progressed, they became less focused on their own needs, that is, ensuring that the lesson had been well planned, that management of pupils' behaviour and resources had been met, the timing was appropriate and all the other elements which teachers have to take into account in order to be effective in the classroom. As time passed and they became more confident in coping with the day to day life of the classroom, the focus shifted from themselves to the learners and their needs. Fuller (1975) describes three phases of teacher development: 1) concerns about self, moving to 2) concerns about tasks, moving to 3) concerns about the learners and the impact of teaching. It appeared that during the placement the students' concerns had started to move outwards towards the third phase, where the learners and their learning were beginning to become the centre of their concerns. As a result, the students described using greater 'reflection in action' during lessons towards the end of their placement, noting those pupils who participated and appeared engaged and those who did not. They were able to use their greater awareness of pupil involvement to assess whether learning intentions for the lesson had been fulfilled and then used their assessments to reflect on subsequent strategies for improving their practice (Smyth 1989). This implicit feedback played a large part in their reflections 'on action' and subsequent discussions with their mentors 'for action' in succeeding lessons. As they passed the 'tipping point' between concentrating on themselves and becoming more learner-centred, they also noted that their relationships with the learners appeared to improve. There is a great deal written about teacher feedback to learners (Hounsell, 2003). Brookfield (1995) emphasises the importance of learner feedback, but there appears to be little research conducted relating to learner feedback to teachers on their practice, either explicit or implicit at school level, and how this may be used to improve reflective practices.

### Conclusions

The students all recognised the significance of feedback in their development of reflection in order to improve their efficacy as beginning teachers. The three types of feedback they identified appeared to be complementary. Students were able to discuss pupil feedback with their mentors and peers and used the ensuing discussions as an aid to reflection

on their practice in the classroom. When they were faced with mentor advice which appeared directive, rather than facilitating reflective habits, the students drew on their understanding of theory and revisited the research literature to inform themselves of what is considered 'good' practice, which they then tried to apply in their classroom context. In situations where mentor guidance was lacking, they turned to the feedback that their peers and the pupils provided to make sense of what had happened during lessons.

While acknowledging that the mentor had a central role in the development process, the students were not always able to distinguish the role that peer feedback played in supporting them to reflect, nor did they identify explicitly the role of theory and research studies, although they were mentioned in the interviews as being valuable, particularly when discussing practice in informal social situations. It seems that reflection was viewed as somehow separate from what the students termed peer 'support'. This was surprising, as arguably this could be considered a powerful aid to reflection, as theory and practice were unpicked in the informal non-threatening confines of a bar or coffee house.

Another powerful perspective, pupil feedback, also tended to be viewed as separate from reflection. Learner feedback was designated by the majority of the students as a support for forward planning, rather than informing reflection on their practice. It appeared that 'reflection' was regarded by the majority of the students as something abstract, to be done outside the classroom, often on their own, rather than a practical, pro-active process permeating practice, inside and outside the classroom. While none of the students specifically mentioned the underpinning theory as an aid to reflection, the forms of feedback identified appeared to lead to a deeper interrogation of the academic literature, particularly when situations did not conform to what was regarded as 'good' practice.

Although this research study was on a small-scale, it throws up two main areas that might benefit from further research. In the business context, informal peer mentoring has been identified as providing an antidote to stress (Siegel, 2000) and enabling higher levels of knowledge management (Karkoulou et al., 2008). While this may also be true for teaching students, little appears to be known about the development of reflection through the informal discussions that take place between fellow travellers on the journey to developing effective classroom practice. Pupil feedback is also an area which students need to recognise as an important lens through which to view their practice. A more systematic approach to garnering learner feedback may support the development of greater reflective skills, and enable students to describe, inform, confront and restructure their teaching (Smyth, 1989). It is intended to explore different types of feedback explicitly with future cohorts of teaching students in order that they may fully exploit the potential of the use of different types of feedback to direct their reflections, as an integral part of their practice, rather than as a separate process.

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